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AUTHOR	Peyton, Joy Kreeft
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ABSTRACT

Students at all levels of literacy learning can express their ideas in print. Teachers working with student writers have found that the attempt to express, organize, and understand personal experience is also a powerful language learning device. When students publish their writings, they can see their own thoughts and concerns, and those of others like them, represented and validated in print. Many literacy programs compile student writings into booklets, newsletters, or magazines both for in-house distribution and for external audiences. When adult learners publish for outside audiences, they are motivated to produce interesting and clearly-written texts and gain self-esteem. When students serve on editorial boards to categorize, select, edit, and prepare pieces for publication, they have opportunities to identify and reflect on good writing. The readers of learner-produced materials benefit from the simplicity of text and topic, are inspired to write, and are provided with an inexpensive source of needed reading material. A successful writing program for limited-English-proficient adult literacy learners requires a process approach to writing, conversation as an essential part of the process, personal experience and the community as resources for material, and a well-developed publication system. A list of student-published materials is included. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Joy Kreeft Peyton

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Listening to Students' Voices: Educational Materials Written By and For LEP Adult Literacy Learners

Prepared by Joy Kreeft Peyton

December 1989

Suffering the traumas of war and flight; adjusting to life in a crowded, multifamily dwelling in a refugee camp; remembering and missing country, family, and friends; struggling to function in a new language and culture -- All of us have compelling stories to tell, and those written by adult literacy learners from other countries can be "fascinating, enlightening, touching, and inspiring beyond our capacity to imagine. There is a sweet sadness, an intense excitement, and a window to the world to be revealed if refugees and immigrants to the U.S. can be encouraged to tell their stories and to share them with [others]" (Rawlston, 1988, p. 1).

Across the United States, literacy and general education programs for adults learning English are discovering the power of learners' stories, encouraging and helping learners to express their life events orally or in writing, and publishing those accounts as materials for other students learning to read and write in English. This digest gives a rationale for an approach to teaching literacy using materials written by students. Features of a successful writing and publishing program, program descriptions, and sources of published materials written by adult learners are also presented.

Encouraging Students To Write

Students at all levels of literacy learning can express their ideas in print. At beginning levels, they may work in their native language. Their thoughts may be dictated orally, written down by a teacher or aide, and read back to them. As they continue to read and write, learners gradually become more independent, and most learners begin to shift their focus from their own experiences to reflection on broader social and cultural issues. Regardless of level, learners whose writing is appreciated and shared with others are motivated to write as they discover that the realities of their own lives are worth thinking about, getting down on paper, and sharing. Teachers working with student writers have found that the attempt to express, organize, and understand personal experience is also a powerful language learning device, a way to draw the storyteller into a meaningful relationship with English (Rawlston, 1988).

Publishing Student Writing

When students publish their writings, they have the opportunity to see their own thoughts and concerns, and those of others like them, represented in print. They have a voice both within and beyond the classroom. Their thoughts, experiences, and ideas are recognized and validated as they learn to express them in worthwhile and readable ways. As Sharon (Howell) Cox, a writer and writing teacher at the Jefferson Park Writing Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts explains, "I think everybody deserves a voice. . . . [Nobody] in the culture should have more of a voice than the next person" (quoted in Martin, 1989, p. 7).

Many literacy programs compile student writings into booklets, newsletters, or magazines for in-house distribution, but an increasing number of programs go a step beyond, to publish for a wider audience. Students' writing becomes reading material for other students like them. In Boston, for example, an adult English-as-a-second-language (ESL) class produced a magazine of student writings that was distributed to native Bostonians so they could better understand the experiences of contemporary immigrants (Russell, 1985). The Publishing for Literacy Project regularly publishes a literary magazine of adult student writings (*Need I say more*). Tales From Boston Neighborhoods, a project of the Boston Public Library, publishes writings by adult literacy/ESL participants, who describe their communities from their own perspectives to counteract media portrayals of those communities as only crime- and drug-ridden. In Pennsylvania, a writing contest for adult basic education and basic literacy students (both native and nonnative English speaking) resulted in the publication of an anthology of selected fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, distributed to literacy project directors across the United States (*Publishing an anthology of adult student writing*, 1985). (Information about how to obtain these materials and descriptions of some of these programs are given at the end of this digest.)

When adult learners publish for real audiences outside their classes who can learn from what they have to say, not only are they motivated to produce interesting and clearly written texts, but they also receive immeasurable boosts to their self-esteem. In addition, when students serve on editorial boards to categorize, select, edit, and prepare pieces for publication, they have opportunities to identify and reflect on good writing.

There are distinct benefits for readers of learner-produced materials as well. Commercially-produced texts used in adult literacy programs often contain material far removed from the realities that adult learners actually face, and the simple topics and language structures presented often hold little interest or cognitive challenge for them (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985). But student-produced materials can form a body of contemporary knowledge, closely tied to the lives of the people reading it and providing inspiration to them to write their own stories. "Learners find these stories interesting when they see their own struggles reflected. Because the language of learners is used in the stories, they are easy to read. [Learners'] stories can also provide a source of inexpensive and creative reading material where materials are direly needed" (Gaber-Katz & Horsman, 1988).

A Successful Writing and Publishing Program

A successful writing program for LEP adult literacy learners depends on several elements: a process approach to writing,

conversation as an essential and ongoing part of the writing process, personal experience and the community as resources for material, and a well-developed system for publication.

A process approach to writing. Writing needs to be treated as a recursive and collaborative process of discovery in which students think through and discuss ideas with each other, draft text, let the text sit, discuss it, revise, draft some more, discuss and revise some more, until they have a piece with which they are satisfied.

Conversation as an essential part of the writing process. Adults who do not consider themselves readers and writers can freeze when confronted with a blank piece of paper and expected to produce something. By conversing throughout the writing process with supportive co-writers, they begin to shape their ideas.

Personal experience and the community as resources. The importance of personal experience as a starting point for writing has been discussed above. Not only the oral sharing of experiences and ideas, but artifacts of that experience, such as pictures and favorite objects brought from home or the native country, can provide a powerful stimulus for writing. At the same time, oral histories memorialized in print preserve and validate the knowledge and practices of a group, language, or culture (Gillispie, 1989).

A system for publication. Publication beyond the classroom takes considerable planning and organization. Most programs have an editorial board consisting at least in part, and sometimes entirely, of student writers. The board establishes criteria for, reads, and selects contributions; it then works with authors to revise pieces, edits them, and puts the publication together. The most interesting writing comes from programs that stress originality—a story that hasn't been told before or a theme that people need or want to hear about—and that include accounts of personal resourcefulness and heroism in the midst of conflicts. Programs may need to seek additional funds for publication and to develop a system for dissemination. Martin (1989) provides some possible sources for funding and some tips about dissemination.

Conclusion

The practice of having beginning LEP readers and writers write for other beginning readers and writers is quite new but has already had promising results. Students who see their own writings in print and valued by others experience increased motivation and self-esteem, and thus an increased desire to develop their abilities. Not only are authors enriched by getting their thoughts on paper, but those who read their works are enriched by having access to their experiences. With such a powerful means for getting beginning readers and writers started, there is no need to agonize that there are "no available materials appropriate for these students." We already have a rich and compelling body of literature, as shown by the list of materials below, and we can look forward to much more.

Available Student-Published Materials

The following texts were written by or collected as oral histories from adult literacy learners, most of whom were learning English as a second language. Many of these items come from a list compiled by the Family Literacy Project at the University of Massachusetts, Boston (c.f. Auerbach, 1989 for annotations of these and other materials for adults becoming literate in ESL). In addition to the contacts given, some of these materials are now or soon will be available from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS): 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304, 1-800-227-3742. Contact NCLE for information on obtaining those materials with an asterisk.

Book voyage: Personal accounts of newly literate people from around the world. (Available sometime in 1990 from the International Task Force on Literacy, 720 Bathurst St., Suite 500, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2R4.)

Hear my soul's voice: A literary magazine of adult student writings. Cambridge: Jefferson Park Writing Center. (Published once a year. Available from Jefferson Park Writing Center, 6 Jefferson Park, Apt. 52, Cambridge, MA 02140.)

**Looking forward, looking back: Writings from many worlds.* University of Massachusetts, Boston. Family Literacy Project, 1989.

**Mosaic.* (An annual magazine of students' autobiographical stories and photographs, published from 1982-1988. Available from *Mosaic*, 95 G Street, South Boston, MA 02127.)

My name is Rose. By Rose Doiron. (Available from East End Literacy, 265 Gerrard Street East, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5A 2G3.)

My story. By Olive Bernard. (Available from Parkdale Project Read, 1303 Queen Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M6K 1L6.)

**Need I say more: A literary magazine of adult student writings.* Boston: Publishing for Literacy Project. (Available from Kona Khasu, Project Coordinator, Publishing for Literacy, Adult Literacy Resource Institute, c/o Roxbury Community College, 1234 Columbus Avenue, Boston, MA 02120.)

Our words, our voices, our worlds. Selected poetry and prose by Pennsylvania's Adult Basic Education students. New Oxford, PA: Lincoln Intermediate Unit No. 12, 1985. (EDRS, ED No. 260 185.)

The story of Ana, La Historia de Ana. Ely Patricia Martinez Vasquez and others. Pasadena, CA: Hope Publishing House, 1986. (Available from Hope Publishing House, P.O. Box 60008, Pasadena, CA 91106.)

String bracelet: Reflections of and by the young people of Southeast Asia, 1988. (Available from Intercultural Productions, P.O. Box 57343, Washington, DC 20036.)

Tales from Boston neighborhoods. (Available from Rachel Martin, Dudley Branch Library, 65 Warren Street, Roxbury, MA 02119).

Tell me about it: Reading and language activities around multi-cultural issues based on an oral history approach. Azi Ellowitch. Philadelphia: LaSalle University, Urban Studies and Community Services Center, 1986. (Available from Urban Studies and Community Services Center of LaSalle University, 5501 Wister Street, Philadelphia, PA 19144.) (EDRS, ED No. 288 998.)

**Voices: New writers for new readers.* Surrey, British Columbia: Lower Mainland Society for Literacy and Employment. (Available from Voices, 14525-110A Avenue, Surrey, British Columbia, Canada V3R 2B4.)

*Five student-produced magazines are also available from the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Worker-Family Education Program, 1710 Broadway, NY 10019.

The East End Literacy Press has published a series of books, written by adult literacy learners, available from: Dominie Press Limited, 1361 Huntingwood Drive, Unit 7, Agincourt, Ontario, Canada M1S 3J1.

Programs Focusing on Student-Published Materials

Detailed descriptions of programs in which adult ESL students write and publish their works are given in:

Publishing an anthology of adult student writing: A partnership for literacy, 1985. Oxford, PA: Lincoln Intermediate Unit No. 12. (EDRS, ED No. 260 184.)

Rawlston, S. (1988, Winter). My story: Refugee and immigrant students telling their personal histories. *TESOL in Action, 3*(1), 1-10. (Available from *TESOL in Action*, c/o Linda Grant, The Language Institute, Education Extension, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332.)

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